



## Ending Child Marriage in Malawi: Girls Empowerment Network & Let Girls Lead



Malawian girl leaders participating  
in a GENET-sponsored march

*"In partnership with Let Girls Lead, we are empowering girls to raise their voices and advocate for their rights. The girls are educating village leaders and achieving bylaws that bring an end to child marriage and other harmful traditional practices."*

**--Faith Phiri, GENET Executive Director**

### ABOUT LET GIRLS LEAD

Let Girls Lead has contributed to improved health, education, and livelihoods for more than 3 million girls globally. Let Girls Lead empowers girls and their allies to lead social change through advocacy, education, economic empowerment, storytelling, and strategic partnerships. Let Girls Lead's impacts include the passage of national laws, programs, and funding that protect girls from violence, ensure girls can attend school, stay healthy, and learn skills to escape poverty.

For more information please visit:  
[www.letgirlslead.org](http://www.letgirlslead.org)

### The Girls Empowerment Network

The Girls Empowerment Network (GENET) has worked in Malawi since 2008 to create "a world where empowered girls and young women are free to exercise their rights and live peacefully in a just, humane and equitable society." Let Girls Lead has partnered with GENET since 2010, protecting thousands of girls from child marriage. GENET's Executive Director and Director of Communications were both selected to participate in Let Girls Lead's prestigious Adolescent Girls' Advocacy & Leadership Initiative (AGALI), where they learned to advocate for girl-centered laws, programs, and funding. Since 2011, Let Girls Lead has awarded GENET funding to pilot an innovative approach to ending child marriage in Malawi. Let Girls Lead continues to provide GENET with extensive capacity building, funding, and technical support to scale up their successful advocacy to end child marriage.

### The Crisis of Child Marriage in Malawi

In Malawi, child marriage is a widespread problem – nearly 50% of girls are married by age 18, with girls often marrying as young as age 10.<sup>1</sup> Child marriage prevents girls from finishing school, and often leads to early pregnancy, exposure to HIV/AIDS, and high risk of maternal mortality. Child marriage rates are far higher in rural areas than in cities, as villages more commonly adhere to traditional practices, which include early marriage and sexual cleansing initiation rites. Despite national laws prohibiting marriage under the age of 15, rural villages follow their own traditional legal structures that often sanction marriages of very young girls, contributing to Malawi's extremely high rates of HIV/AIDS and maternal mortality. A national bill to increase the legal age of marriage in Malawi from 15 to 18 years has been stalled in Parliament since 2010, while a coalition of civil society organizations, including GENET, continues to advocate for its passage.



*"As a typical girl in Chitera, my ambitions were low. I did not work that hard in school because there was no certain future built on the foundation of education. I looked forward to my initiation day and to eventually getting married. But having gone through GENET training sessions, this perception has changed. I became motivated. I developed confidence in myself. I wanted to take action."*

**--Thokozani Kazembe, Adolescent Girl Program Participant**



## A New Approach to Ending Child Marriage

In 2011, GENET partnered with Let Girls Lead to launch the Stop Child Marriage program in the Chiradzulo District in Southern Malawi, which empowers girls to end child marriage in their communities. The project engages girls, community members, chiefs and Traditional Authorities,<sup>2</sup> and the media in the fight to end child marriage and harmful traditional practices in the region. An independent evaluation commissioned by the UN Foundation demonstrates that GENET's community-based approach has sharply decreased the incidence of early marriage and increased girls' school enrollment rates<sup>3</sup> in Malawi. This path-breaking model has focused national and global media attention on the disastrous social, economic, and health impacts of child marriage for girls and their communities.

## Empowering Girls to Lead Change

Before partnering with Let Girls Lead, GENET's work had focused on girls' leadership development and direct service provision. GENET staff report that they wanted to help girls advocate for their own needs but did not know how to begin. After learning how to develop an advocacy strategy through Let Girls Lead, GENET's leaders integrated community-based advocacy into their ongoing girls' empowerment work.

GENET invited over 200 girls in the district to join the Stop Child Marriage project, helping them to think critically about child marriage and develop their own solutions to the challenges they faced. The girls used art, poetry, and creative writing to capture and share their experiences, focusing on education, cultural practices, and marriage. The girls highlighted early sexual debut, child marriage, pressure to drop out of school, and domestic violence as their principal challenges, and met in groups to discuss what they had written. GENET trained the girls in leadership, advocacy, and public speaking so they could present the publication to the community and share their experience with traditional and government leaders. GENET then published a compilation of their girls' stories to share with policy makers, traditional leaders, and Members of Parliament.

## Media Advocacy

GENET strategically engaged the media from the launch of the project, recognizing that sharing girls' personal stories would sensitize community members, government decision-makers, and the public to the harmful impacts of child marriage. They invited journalists to attend stakeholder meetings, and produced videos and digital stories to share with media outlets, communities, and key government decision-makers.

1. UNICEF. (2010). At a Glance: Malawi. Retrieved January 8, 2014, from UNICEF: [http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/malawi\\_statistics.html#90](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/malawi_statistics.html#90)

2. 'Malawi's 28 districts are subdivided into Traditional Authorities (TAs), presided over by chiefs. The term "Traditional Authority" refers both to an administrative area and to the chief in charge of it.

3. More details about Let Girls Lead's independent evaluation are available here: [www.letgirlslead.org](http://www.letgirlslead.org)

GENET's first video, called "The Story of Florence & Harmful Traditional Practices in Malawi," shares the experiences of one of the girls who participated in the Stop Child Marriage project. Florence married a much older man at age 15, immediately after she had completed a traditional girls' initiation ceremony. Told from Florence's own perspective, the documentary is a very powerful advocacy tool that captures the negative physical and psychological consequences of early marriage. GENET also produced a digital story featuring the organization's Communications Director, highlighting her personal motivations for advocating to end child marriage and other harmful practices. GENET used these video resources to spark discussion during community forums and in meetings with traditional authorities and government agencies. By strategically engaging local and national media, GENET also increased public awareness of child marriage and its negative consequences throughout Malawi and the world.



Cover for GENET's  
"I will marry when I want" campaign

## Policy Results

GENET recognized that ending child marriage would require government leaders and traditional authorities to take action. Using the media and storytelling tools they developed, GENET organized local and national Policy Dialogues with decision-makers, which generated support from national lawmakers, and led to a key alliance with a female Head Chief from Chitera.

Building on their girl-centered advocacy and media outreach, GENET worked with the Head Chief from Chitera and a group of village chiefs to develop local bylaws that prohibit child marriage and penalize men who engage in the practice. GENET then sent the bylaws to the community to review and approve, and shared the results with district-level and national government decision-makers. The traditional authorities increased the legal age of marriage to age 21 within their villages, and instigated penalties for men who marry underage girls, including significant fines paid in goats, chickens, and land. Chiefs and parents who allow child marriage are penalized with community service requirements that include three months of janitorial work in the local community health center or school.

## Impacts for Girls

Within the first year of GENET's Stop Child Marriage project, chiefs from 22 villages ratified bylaws that protect thousands of girls from early marriage. GENET also empowered over 200 adolescent girls to advocate for their rights, and sensitized traditional leaders and district level decision-makers on the negative effects of child marriage. GENET continues to ensure implementation of the bylaws, and is expanding their work through funding from Let Girls Lead and other partners. An independent evaluation of Let Girls Lead and GENET demonstrates that child marriage in participating communities has sharply declined, while girls' school enrollment has increased.

Head Chief Chitera continues to work with GENET to ensure that participating communities comply with the bylaws. Each village established a taskforce to monitor and enforce implementation of these new bylaws, leading to the unprecedented near elimination of child marriage in these communities. In one case, a group of girls trained by GENET used the bylaws to advocate with local leaders, successfully annulling a marriage between their 13-year-old friend and her 19-year-old husband. Village chiefs have demonstrated an unprecedented commitment to these bylaws – one Head Chief removed her own grandson from his position as Group Village Headman for impregnating a schoolgirl.

Beyond drastically reducing the rates of child marriage, the Stop Child Marriage project has also transformed community attitudes in Malawi. The external evaluation demonstrates that the community now views child marriage as shameful, rather than a desirable arrangement generating social and material gain. This broader societal shift is reflected in the creation of community-led Girls' Education Funds in some participating villages, which use local resources to promote girls' education and help child marriage victims return to school.